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A vital lifeline - UK Libraries Plus 1999 - 2006



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Introduction

It seems perhaps incredible now that only eight years ago there was no national scheme for student access and borrowing at higher education libraries. Yet the need was clear. With ever increasing part time students, often studying at a distance from the University or College they had signed up to, libraries were constantly dealing with the complaint that students could not get easy access to the reading materials they were expected to use for the course. Placement students, often spending many weeks away from their home institution yet expected to do course work, were also experiencing the same problems.

In some regions, schemes such as London Plus (which had started in 1988) went some way to meeting this need, but cross a regional boundary and customers had nothing. Worse, many libraries, even those with extensive provision for part timers of their own, made sure the barriers were in place to prevent the much feared swamping by those oiks from the University next door. As the then Site Librarian at South Bank University I remember having to maintain a long list of who we let in and who we didn't depending on the access agreement with each particular institution. What a waste of time and energy it now seems!

What was needed was someone to cut the Gordian knot and just do something. In 1999 our doughty champion was found in Philip Payne, then at Leeds Metropolitan University and now, very appropriately, Librarian at Birkbeck, University of London.

Formation

On 18th February 1999 Philip emailed University Librarians on behalf of Coalition of Modern Universities asking for expressions of interest in a national access and borrowing scheme for part time and distance learning students. Roy Williams (University of North London) forwarded the email to me and I responded, as the then Convenor of the regional London Plus scheme, to offer help and support. Looking back on the initial email exchange with Philip, it is perhaps not surprising to see that the fear of swamping was a key concern for potential member libraries right from the begining.

London Plus, an Inner London Polytechnics (INPOL) idea from 1988, was by 1999 up to 23 member libraries, which gave us a good core membership for a national scheme (and part of the name!). Meetings at Derby in June 1999 and London Guildhall University on 5th July 1999 moved plans on rapidly. The pilot UK Libraries Plus (UKLP) scheme was launched in September 2000 with 60 libraries in membership. In 2006, at the time of transfer to SCONUL 146 libraries out of a possible 166 were in membership, 87% of UK higher education libraries.

Constitution

The initial steering group was simply people showing an interest in running the scheme. During the first year we agreed that a more representative structure was needed for the long term, so we wrote and agreed with the heads of services a constitution – which required voting to change - and set of operating principles to deal with day to day practicalities, which the Steering Group (UKLPSG) could amend for itself.

The Constitution covered several issues of concern to potential members. Perhaps the two most important issues it contains were:

- Reciprocity, there being an agreement in principle to a transfer of funding if monitoring revealed a significant imbalance in the use of the scheme by member institutions. This was anti-swamping clause and was never used.
- Publicly funded higher education institutions only as members. Over the years there were a number of requests from private colleges to join, who clearly had little library provision and from the further education sector, for whom we had much more sympathy. However, the key aim was to get as many higher education libraries in and we knew that opening the scheme up to the FE sector would make this aim impossible to achieve.

With the Operating Principles, the UKLPSG deliberately had more room for manoeuvre. Of all the principles, number 2 was the one I referred people to time and time again. It states:

“UK Libraries Plus is open to the libraries of all institutions of higher education, funded by one of the UK HE funding bodies, subject to acceptance by the UK Libraries Plus Steering Group. The funding bodies currently recognised are:

- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
- Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC)
- Scottish Executive
- Department for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland)
- Teacher Training Agency (TTA)

It is not open to privately funded higher education institutions or to further education colleges offering higher education programmes. The scheme is open to HE students on courses or programmes operated in or by partner institutions (whether HE or FE), in those cases where such students enjoy full access and borrowing rights at the home (qualification awarding) higher education institution's library.”

The need to ensure the correct things were in the Constitution or the Operating Principles was illustrated when we discovered that the Scottish Agricultural College was funded by the Scottish Executive not SHEFC and so, whilst a bona fide HE college, couldn't join! Much work ensued getting votes by email and at the AGM, but worth it as we realised a name change by say HEFCE (written in to the Constitution) would have meant us doing this anyway. SAC were of course most impressed to see all of UKLP evolve to suit them!

The other part of principle 2 is the issue of the partner libraries, a clause originally added at the request of Gordon Brewer (University of Derby) to ensure their partner colleges, whose students were full University students but studying at a local further education college, could be included. This has been by far the most asked about principle, the issue so often coming down to the legal agreement between a University and partner college as to levels of service offered.

Steering Group

A key feature of the Constitution was that the membership of the UKLPSG would be by election, with the Convenor (me) as an appointee, to allow for any future use of paid staff (which neatly foresaw the way SCONUL Research Extra operated) and also giving the group a person whose non-elected status meant they could run the very popular elections.

We also allowed for co-option from other groups, which lead to the long standing and valuable co-option of Toby Bainton (SCONUL) and Caroline House (UCISA). Toby's keen eye for wording of principles and Caroline's very fruitful advice on getting money from JISC for the customer survey and for Computing Plus made their co-option fully justified.

It is a tribute the popularity of UKLP that every single election to the SG was contested with one occasion eleven candidates standing for the three vacant places on the group. It is also good to see that this principle has continued into the new SCONUL Access group which will have four places for elected representatives. Indeed, this continued enthusiasm to stand for election has been frequently commented on, as it is in stark contrast to the many professional bodies who struggle to find committee members.

What also strikes me about the many people who have been on the UKLP Steering Group is the positive way developments were debated and agreed, with a pragmatic view always to the fore. We always kept in mind our reality check of a library assistant, part time, who only works the Sunday shift. If we made this change, how would it impact on this person? I think it shows great maturity to have a group debate a new idea thoroughly and enthusiastically but then agree that, good idea that it was, it would not work on the front line and therefore should be dropped. A key principle here was that, as far as possible, the scheme should be nationally uniform to make the rules simple, which was followed for the core service, if not for full time post graduates or the Open University.

Of course key to our success was chairing by Philip Payne and then Sara Marsh who both made sure debate was through and that all voices were heard.

Representatives

The UKLP SG could not have made the scheme work without the representatives in each library, many of whom were candidates for the SG. Indeed, I believe the idea that any rep

could stand for election if they wished was a powerful motivator as it gave reps a real sense of ownership of the scheme. These were the real heroines and heros of the scheme without whom it simply could not have worked.

Effective communication with this group was key and demonstrated the power of email as without the JISCmail list, I'm not sure how we could have managed. Certainly better than the carbon copied typed letters used by London Plus back in 1988!

Some reps went further than merely local administration which led for example to Brighton taking on the manufacture and distribution of the membership cards and latterly Roehampton looking after the web site¹. In all cases, the additional workload was simply absorbed by the libraries concerned, allowing the cards to be supplied at cost thus keeping the scheme affordable for member libraries.

What did the customers think of the scheme?

UKLP did two surveys of its users, the first very much a home brew paper exercise which relied on data input by some GCSE level school placement students working for me at Central School of Speech and Drama and funded by SCONUL as part of the work of the working group on Distance Learning, followed by a much more professional survey run by LISU and funded thanks to JISC.

The surveys gave us a useful picture of the typical user who is a 38 year old postgraduate student studying an MSc in social sciences or an MBA who values the service for easy access from their home and book loans. They regard the scheme as vital for their studies. They would like to be able to borrow more books than current quotas allow. Comments on the survey forms were typically like this one from a MA History and Culture of Sport student, living in Street, Somerset, using University of the West of England and registered to study at De Montfort

".. it is a vital lifeline, and only one hour from home rather than 4."

Developing the scheme

Both surveys gave us ideas and inspiration on where to take the scheme next.

A key finding from the first survey was the need to do something about **access to IT facilities** in libraries and from this was born the UK Computing Plus scheme lead by Sara Marsh. Pilot projects were established in a few member libraries to increase access to IT, ranging from a PC for visitors to more extensive access to e-resources. This led to a toolkit of advice for other libraries to draw on, available on the web site.

However, perhaps the most nationally significant achievement for Sara and her group was lobbying JISC and Eduserv to get the licenses for e-resources changed to allow use by **walk in library users**, and thus UKLP and SRX members. In my view this is probably as significant an achievement as the establishment of the scheme itself, as it solved the long term problem that as more resources, journals in particular, went electronic, far from improving, access was gradually being taken away from UKLP users.

As I write, the HEARVI project is looking at how libraries and, perhaps more importantly, IT services, can take full advantage of the walk in user clause. That JISC is funding this with £50,000 shows great confidence in the ideas and the people involved.

We also kept pushing libraries to join. It is sad that by the end of the scheme, we still had no member libraries in N Ireland and there remained a hard core of older universities not willing to join. A particular problem we faced was the **Open University**, who as the UK's biggest provider of part time higher education courses naturally ought to be in the scheme but whose student population really did threaten a major swamping problem. At the time the OU had some 160,000 students, virtually all part time, spread across the UK. In each of the 13 regions, there was a large student population, up to 30,000 in some cases, effectively 13 Universities of the size of Manchester Met. When canvassed for views, a number of heads of service pointed out that the OU, with its single library at Milton Keynes, was in no position to reciprocate access for, say, its Scottish resident students. As reciprocity was a key constitutional principle, this was a major issue for us to deal with.

The answer was a membership quota. I recall spending a train journey to an SG meeting playing around with what felt at the time like a pretty spurious set calculations to come up with a workable formula. Based on the numbers of students using the OU library, this would allow the OU a small number of cards to issue which would get them into the scheme, but at the same time reassure member libraries that all 160,000 students were not going to strip the shelves bare. With each year, growth in the use of the library at the OU by external users and confidence in the system has allowed the quota to grow and for the 2006-2007 academic year it stands at some 4500 borrower cards. As a further safeguard, libraries were allowed to opt out. It was pleasing to note that only six did, nearly all of whom have now changed their view.

The final big idea was expanding the scheme to allow borrowing by **full time taught post graduate** students, following on the start of SCONUL Research Extra (SRX) which was open to research students. Debate on whether just to include M-level or to throw the net wide to encompass PG Certs and PG Dips was settled by concern that our hypothetical Sunday assistant needed simple rule to follow. Post graduates of any flavour it was. The scheme was launched as a pilot in 2005, with again an opt-out clause. This was taken up by a few libraries, most notably the London School of Economics, given already high levels of use as noted below.

How well did we do?

In order to keep the scheme simple, we only ever measured borrowing use. In part this was because it then meant the reference cards could be kept simpler but mainly as it was the fear of swamping by borrowers that we needed evidence to counter. In the 2005-2006 academic year, 17885 borrowing cards were taken of which 7850 were used to obtain actual membership. To give some idea of size, Roehampton University has a total student population of 7800.

The statistics showed swamping never happened. The closest we got to any one library suffering from overuse was the London School of Economics. LSE had a net 581 extra borrowers thanks to UKLP (583 incomers and only 2 outgoing LSE users). This adds something like 6.25% to the number of customers at the LSE, which is quite significant. It is not surprising that the LSE has not signed up for the full time post graduate pilot.

As the scheme grew it attracted comments in the Quality Assurance Agency subject and institutional reviews, for example:

“...The UK Libraries Plus scheme, allowing access to country-wide academic libraries, is a valuable facility for postgraduate students, most of whom are part-time distance learners².”

The QAA in summing up the period 2002-2004 noted:

“There is good student access to learning centres, which is further enhanced in cases where there is membership of UK Libraries Plus.³”

The future with SCONUL

Towards the end of his time as UKLP chair, Philip Payne floated the possibility of a merger with SCONUL. Quite rightly he was concerned at what might happen once the scheme ceased to grow and became steady state. Who would be prepared to keep things going? Was there a risk of a moribund SG allowing the scheme to drift? There was also concern about the financial future. The scheme always had a healthy bank balance, as many conferences ran with free use of rooms thanks to the organising libraries. But what might happen in a few years time?

What made the move to SCONUL easier was that by now SRX had been set up with, in most libraries, the same rep looking after both schemes. To the people on the ground, having two schemes increasingly made no sense. SCONUL was also more confident it could take the scheme on as SRX was a success and had attracted sufficient funding to enable it to run without being a drain on the limited resources of the three person Secretariat. With the backing of the heads of service and the UKLPSG, the SCONUL Task and Finish Group worked to bring the schemes together.

UKLP ceased to be an independent organisation from 31st July 2006 and I took the opportunity of this change to step down after 7 years as convenor. Appropriately for a part time centred group, the final UKLP AGM took place at the Open University Library.

New SCONUL Access group has on its agenda decisions on current brands (UKLP and SRX) and what to do with them. At the time of writing a single brand scheme is set to launch in summer 2007. It also has a SCONUL funded project working on a new website with the prospect of online registration, a contentious issue for some reps for whom the UKLP card is almost now a sacred object. The new chair John Hall (Durham), the founding chair of SRX, has been fostering potential international links with both the Australian CAUL scheme and with LIBER who are developing a European libraries passport. Perhaps an International Libraries Plus is not far off?

Conclusions

UK Libraries Plus was, I believe, a stunning success. A mix of pragmatic ideas and radical thinking, we set up a scheme few believed was possible. This could not have been achieved without the hard work and determination of Philip and Sara, the SG, the reps (particularly those that took on jobs like printing the cards and editing the website) and all those front line library staff who promoted the scheme and issued the cards. Without this

huge team effort, it would not have happened. It has been a joy and an honour to serve with such dedicated people.

It has had a durable impact on UK HE libraries. Students now can, for the most part, study and borrow from the library most convenient to them. As students are increasingly time poor, many could not cope without the access UKLP gives them. The UK Computing Plus breakthrough on licenses cracked another major problem, without which access to libraries would have become increasingly useless.

UKLP is first and foremost about students, so to end, here is my favourite quote from the surveys, from a BSc Coventry University student aged 49:

"While I was studying for my BSc Counselling I was living at home in Radlett, Herts and going up to Coventry once a week in term time for lectures/tutorials. This involved travelling 4 hours each time! I can honestly say I could not have completed my degree without being able to use Univ. of Herts library. It was invaluable."

¹ www.uklibrariesplus.ac.uk

² University of Keele Philosophy subject review, Q135/2001, January 2001
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/revreps/subjrev/all/q135%5F01.pdf>

³ QAA: Academic review of subjects in HEIs – 2002-04: summary report, November 2004,
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/academicreview/summaryreport04/report.asp>